

THE GHENT UNIVERSITY ZOOLOGY MUSEUM: A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

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Abstract

Modern society is characterized by wide ranging ideas on many different topics. This can be reflected in the manner university governments treat their university museums. At the University of Ghent Zoology Museum, we aim to provide the most diverse range of exhibitions and events possible for a non-university public, thus involving the community with our museum. This, in combination with collaborative exhibits with other institutions, means that our University government can no longer ignore us. This is an important benchmark, and as a result, the Ghent University administration is starting to develop our own University Museum Policy.

Introduction

To my public I am known as an animated, vivid guide with an inspiring way of thinking. To the university government I am a too-talkative, tenacious pit-bull who perhaps should be put out of it's misery. How did this situation come about? What can one do to remedy it?

Our museum started off as two different collections with the inauguration of the Ghent University in 1817. A Dutch law of 1816¹ dictated that any academic institution needed to keep and expand natural history collections as an educational tool for the natural history, zoology and anatomy classes. For teaching purposes, our young university had to build a zoology and comparative anatomy collection. For the Zoology Collection, stuffed animals and complete specimens in formalin or alcohol were acquired. The Collection of Comparative Anatomy focused on skeletons and all internal organs and systems (dry and wet preparations). The university collections remained the focal point of research and education in Zoology and Anatomy for many decades; laboratories arrived in the academic world only after the 1870s. Professor Poelman did a lot of work on the anatomy collection and published a catalogue of Comparative Anatomy by 1868. In 1870, Professor Felix Plateau was given both the chair of Comparative Anatomy and the chair of Zoology. The two collections were combined, and Professor Plateau may be regarded as the first Director of the museum as we know it today. Until 1914, the collection and preparation of specimens was the primary focus of the museum.

World War I started a change in the museum's fortunes and future priorities. Many specimens were destroyed, taken away or even given away. This continued until after World War II. Since that time, the museum has struggled for survival and recognition. We have had to focus less on the preparation of specimens and more on the preservation of the collection.

Seven years ago, when I started as a curator, the Zoology Museum of the University of Gent was so unknown that about 70-80 percent of the people working in our own building did not know the museum existed! Even when you are known, it is often difficult

to get recognition because of inherent prejudice towards the function of museums in contemporary society. People have deeply ingrained ideas concerning the role and function of a museum. In the same way, they have traditional opinions about museum people and what they do (e.g., what a curator does and even looks like). Belgian-Flemish cartoonist/comic-book writer Marc Sleen, in his series about the hero Nero, provides a perfect illustration of the importance and impact of the general public's opinion (1998). Sleen depicts a museum guard asleep on the job with a newspaper closed in his pocket and slippers on his feet. The curator also is depicted as so overweight that the top of his desk has been cut away to fit his belly. Even I started slimming down after seeing this drawing (I eventually ended up losing about 20 pounds).

So, it is not difficult to understand that such attitude and prejudice may exist in our University governments. They preferred to close us down, give no extra personal and under-appreciate the present personnel. The financial under-appreciation of university museum personnel was also noted by Ing-Marie Munktel as being a distinct problem at the Museum Gustavianum of the Uppsala University in Sweden (*pers. com.* 2003).

Solutions

The main objective has to be to involve the community with your museum. We have to prove to the public and our governments that we are indeed interesting as well as necessary. The way to do this is to integrate actively and involve your public with your museum as much as possible. The public is the insurance for our future. Involvement of the community is one of the very few weapons, if not the only one, we have against administrative prejudice and indifference.

We also have to produce high standard scientific research results. The scientific research in university museums has to be based on the same scientific standards as other research done at the university level. To accomplish this, we first have to curate our specimens and, in particular, associated data with scientific

accuracy. This paper, however, will focus on how our university museum engages the community.

The Community in the Ghent University Zoology Museum

How can we serve and use the community to our mutual benefit? Examples from our museum's experience are given below.

Exhibitions or workshops that extend beyond the museum's traditional focus can be organized: people do not expect a concert or exhibition of arts to take place in a natural history museum. Occasionally we organize art exhibitions (paintings, photographs, sculptures) or small concerts located in the normal exhibition area. One man gave a performance with new-age sounds (music) and poetry from among the skeletons with subdued lights. You have to be inventive towards opening the museum to the public. For example, in previous years we organized a "Tasting of exotic meat and fruits" in cooperation with our University Botanical Garden. Guided tours about animals and plants we should and should not eat were followed by visitors actually tasting the animals and plants discussed during the tour. Visitors tasted snails, squid, insects, crocodile, kangaroo and the liver of Bankiva-fowl (*Gallus gallus*). That weekend, more than 400 people tasted insects in our museum. This event received news coverage as far away as Spain. One newspaper even ran the headline: "Best proof that Science is not dull" (Bleys 2002).

Challenging, staggering and even provocative information should be provided. People want to be intrigued, not bored. If, for example, you need to talk about parasites, involve humans as an example of parasitic reproduction; this works especially well when pregnant women are in your audience.

During special exhibitions, you can provide a person to do sign language, so he/she can translate your tour to the hearing-impaired.

Mounting of skeletons can be done as a public event. For example, people will be able to witness the mounting of a new elephant skeleton in our museum. Visitors simultaneously learn about the dangers of buying ivory and artefacts derived from endangered species.

Another important opportunity to consider is the acquisition of new specimens. It is important to collect some specimens with a larger than normal context (interest) than those you would collect normally. A skeleton with a culturally important context is more than just a skeleton. Our skeleton of the elephant Chamba (Fig. 1) was known to Sigourney Weaver and Gerard Depardieu. It gives an interesting story to tell beyond standard scientific information, and will appeal to a larger public. In our collections, I can identify the presence of a collection of specimens prepared by our first ever Director, Prof. Dr. Felix Plateau (son of the inventor



Fig. 1. Student volunteers at Chamba skeleton. Photograph by author.

of cinema, Prof. Dr. Joseph Plateau) of the Zoology Museum; it is a collection of Ziegler wax models and animals of the former Ghent Zoo which all tell different historic narratives. Inviting well-known VIP's always gives something for people to talk about. We had the honour of welcoming Sir David Attenborough and the Belgian royal Prince Laurent.

We organize search exercises for school groups and practical courses for schoolchildren as well as our university students. University students can come to the museum for more than the zoology classes or exercises—they also learn how to give good oral presentations and how to write scientific articles.

We give fun biodiversity quizzes to younger children (in which the parents often join in to help their children win) and even organize quizzes between families. Arts teachers come to our museum with their students to teach and sketch. We give tickets for combined guided tours of the Zoology Museum and the Botanical Garden. We cooperate with the City of Ghent in any special museum events.

Our volunteers not only help in the obvious tasks of basic scientific work, inventorying and collection care, but also in more challenging tasks. This makes their work more interesting. They are trained in how to approach specimens and how to handle and treat them (e.g., the use of gloves). They learn to work with the necessary computer programs. We encourage students to do volunteer work during their spare time. They can help dissect and process new specimens.

The Zoology Museum in the Community

We not only invite people to come to our museum, but we also take the museum to the people. We visit kindergarten classes to let the toddlers get a taste and feel of the museum (e.g., insects and hides) in our "museum on the move" program (Fig. 2). The children respond enthusiastically and develop early ideas of conservation and respect for nature. Instilling ideas about science and its value at an early age is a very important service



Fig. 2. The Zoology Museum visits the kindergarten. Photograph by author.

your university government can recognize, thus eliciting their support for your museum.

On our web site, people find practical information, scientific information and the species/specimens collection-inventory.

It always pays to visit television shows and radio programs as an expert. It gives you the opportunity to connect with many people and get them interested in visiting your museum.

Results

As previously noted, our museum had been struggling since World War I. This did not influence our current administration positively. The Museum found itself increasingly lost in the background until a few years ago when Prof. Dr. A. Coomans (Director until September 2001) decided action was required. He found that some administrators were keen on preserving our university's heritage, but that many others were not so willing to spend any funding on a so-called "bunch of stuffed animals, skeletons and entrails." Pushed, however, by Prof. Dr. E. Vermeersch, Vice-Rector of the University at that time, the board of administrators finally agreed to the appointment of a full-time curator and a small fund to help the Director preserve and maintain this heritage. Since that time, we have tried to use the community to show the University government that these collections are not outdated and are still of high interest and value to our students and the general public. The administration slowly changed their views about the importance of the University's collections and started to appreciate the many good public responses towards the Museum and the University. With the arrival of our new Director, Prof. Dr. D. Adriaens, we also established a Museum Council to expand our efforts to convince the University government of our value. The board of administration finally realized that in using these collections it had found a perfect showcase for the University in general.

With this approach, community engagement continues to increase gradually and the prejudice from the

university continues to decrease. The public is satisfied and eager to return and see what else we will come up with. Volunteers present themselves eager to assist. But most importantly, the University government can no longer ignore the growing engagement of our Museum, and hence of the University, with the community. The trigger for their change in attitude was our ability to demonstrate that the collections could be used as a tool to showcase the University in general. This helped us in such a way that the administration even started to consider formulating a University Museum Policy. Hopefully, we now can extend our current position with greater appreciation of existing museum personnel, and the appointment of more personnel and further adequate funding.

Conclusion

Whatever it takes, we have to keep on fighting against prejudice and ignorance. Whatever the odds, never lose your stamina and never surrender your passion. To maintain relevancy you need creative thinking. It is not enough to start up a new museum in a new building: 30 years from now you and your building still have to be brand-new.

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Notes

¹ Dutch law of 1816, September 25th, article 129

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